

## The Interface of PEG and the Internet

*"Modern communications technology, by itself, will be neither democracy's savior nor its terminator. But unquestionably it will continue to have enormous influence, both for better and for worse, on the nature and character of our political system."*

**Lawrence Grossman**, former president of NBC News and PBS The Electronic Republic: Reshaping Democracy in the Information Age, 1995

The City of Seattle has long been a leader in the use of web technology to provide information to citizens, and was among the first to provide on-line services. And like most cities in the US, we operate a government access television station; these stations are typically like local versions of C-SPAN, covering major meetings and producing some programs about city services. Both the web site and TV channel have been tools to promote transparency in government, one of the key elements in any successful e-democracy initiative. But this is only a first step. The decision-making process needs to be open, but it also needs to be comprehensible and easy to access.

Three years ago we began transforming the channel into a more independent programming source, using both TV and the web to make governmental decision-making more accessible to our residents. *To be a national leader in using technology to dramatically expand civic engagement and public discourse.* This is the goal statement recommended by the Seattle Commission on Electronic Communications, a volunteer citizen group that worked with staff to create a new vision and roadmap to enhance our city government television channel and its website. [www.seattlechannel.org](http://www.seattlechannel.org). We refer to this initiative as Seattle's **Democracy Portal**, and described our initial plans for it in a 2003 article in this Journal.

[www.seattlechannel.org](http://www.seattlechannel.org) is a government web site with a difference. As a companion to the City's main website, [www.seattle.gov](http://www.seattle.gov), The Seattle Channel website organizes information by issues and tries to help interested residents to understand and participate in decisions on those issues.

Like many such channels, it is a window on government. About 30 hours of weekly City Council meetings are broadcast and videostreamed live. There is an indexed archive of more than 1200 videos of meetings and other public affairs programs. These videos are indexed so it is not necessary to watch the entire meeting to hear about one topic under discussion. During many public hearings, official testimony is taken by e-mail as well as in person. Over 1000 people participated in the City's last budget process using e-mail, which is now the predominant method of communication with elected officials.

TV programming on the Seattle Channel has been expanded to create several weekly and monthly public affairs programs, produced and hosted by contract journalists. There is a revealing study conducted by the Alliance for Better Campaigns titled *"All Politics is Local but you wouldn't know it by Watching Local TV"*. The study examined programming on 45 local television stations for the week of October 5 through October 11, 2003 and found there is a near black out of local public affairs. Of the 7,560 hours of programming analyzed, less than one half of one percent – 13 hours – were devoted to local public affairs shows. The Seattle Channel is trying to fill this void in local public affairs programming.

The Channel's website provides detailed information about the top issues and projects going on in the city. For a typical issue, the website will include:

- Background on the issue or topic and the organizations that are involved;
- Videos of relevant public meetings, hearings, forums and other programs;
- Information on upcoming community meetings;
- Recent updates as events occur or decisions are made;
- Links to related information on the City and other websites, news releases, local new stories and reader comments.

The site includes a daily set of links to local media stories on civic issues, turning us into a one-stop site for a quick overview of what is in the news, and easy access to more in-depth information.

A recent innovation is a program that awards small grants to community-based organizations for civic involvement projects. Seattle has a Technology Matching Fund, which has supported technology literacy and access projects to address the digital divide since the mid-1990's. This year, the program funded several Electronic Democracy projects that use e-mail, the Internet or other e-tools to increase communication with government and solve community problems. Eligible projects had to 1) increase awareness of community issues, 2) increase community participation in problem solving, and 3) increase interaction with government.

In partnership with the Annenberg School of Communications *Student Voices* project, we organized and cablecast four meetings between high school students and government officials, including the Mayor, Council President, Police Chief and Schools Superintendent. This year, students will use our website to research civic issues; we will create some opportunities for them to interact with city government using both internet and TV technology. Another initiative we are undertaking at the direction of the City Council is to develop more programming by and about ethnic and other communities who are often left out of the democratic process.

One of our current challenges is to figure out how to make the coverage of decision-making events more interactive. While we have some ability to reference material posted on the web during TV broadcasts, and to refer people on the web to videos, we need to do much more to enhance meeting coverage. We can provide better visuals, more context, and more opportunities for interactive discussions. We are experimenting with different forms of "enhanced meeting coverage," to determine what will work best for both our TV channel and web casting.

The ultimate success of our Democracy Portal needs to be measured in whether participation changes the outcomes of decisions and whether it has an effect on people's trust in government. The first we can see in individual decisions; the second will be a long term goal affected by national and international events as well as those we can control at the local level.

What does it take to be successful? Seattle is one of the most "wired" and technologically literate communities in the world. A 2004 survey showed that more than 75 percent of all residents have home Internet access, and more than 50 percent of those have broadband connections. Even more than half of our seniors have home Internet access. Seattle also has an active citizenry that is knowledgeable about and engaged in civic and community affairs. And our elected officials are committed to broadening citizen participation. These three ingredients are key ingredients for a successful e-democracy initiative.

We have some evidence of success. Almost 70 percent of people with cable television have watched the City's TV channel, up from 58 percent in 1999. The channel's web site page views have gone up from about 22,000 per month to 42,000 per month at the end of 2004. Civic participation has always been strong in Seattle, but we can see its growth through the use of e-mail. Certain issues, (most notably anything involving pets), draw very wide participation from people who don't necessarily get involved in civic affairs. Our weekly polls are not a scientific measure of public opinion, but are a useful measure of interest in the issue.

Seattle has some unique political and cultural characteristics that support our initiative. We are well known for clean and open government. City elected officials have always encouraged citizen participation – Seattle is infamous for its extensive and sometimes never ending public process. But only a limited number of people will spend endless hours at community meetings and public hearings, and our Mayor and City Council members want to hear from a wider variety of people. There is a particular concern to be inclusive of those who rarely participate: youth, non-native English speakers, and others who feel disenfranchised from the process or simply do not have the time to become educated and attend meetings.

Cities in the United States that have been operating government access television stations are perfectly positioned to take advantage of technological convergence to facilitate e-democracy. Internationally, organizations interested in web casting to promote government transparency are struggling with many of the policy and procedural questions that have become routine for organizations that have been cablecasting public meetings for many years. With many of these issues already addressed in our cablecasting policies, it is not that great a step to use internet technology to increase the audience for our programming and the depth of our coverage.

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*This article is based on a paper published by the Oxford Internet Institute as part of the proceedings of a symposium on e-democracy held in May, 2004.*